

## UDOT to avoid lane closure on Utah County freeway project

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PROVO — The construction-related lane closure expected to cause long delays between Orem's University Parkway and Provo's Center Street exits has been scrapped.

The announcement came during a news conference as Utah Department of Transportation officials unveiled three significant improvements to its I-15 CORE project. The others include a pedestrian tunnel under University Parkway and a new plan for the Center Street interchange.

Plans had been made to close the southbound lane of I-15 beginning May 6 so crews could widen and straighten a stretch of road and bridges on the freeway known as the "s curves." Closing the lane was projected to significantly increase travel times.

"The s curves have always been a challenge for us," said UDOT executive director John Njord. "We knew that during construction, this would be an extremely difficult spot for us because we didn't think we could accommodate enough traffic over these bridges."

But over the past several days, he said, a solution was reached. "We've found a way to accommodate three lanes of traffic through these bridges, and therefore we won't be taking those lanes down."

Instead of closing the southbound lane, UDOT will reduce the speed limit and narrow all three lanes and both shoulders of the road — a change that should reduce the expected delays. Striping units could be working as early as Sunday, and the new traffic control will be implemented in about two weeks.

"The good news is we'll have three lanes in each direction, which will minimize the impact on folks as they travel through the construction zone," Njord said. "That's great news."

UDOT deputy director Carlos Braceras said that while closing a lane to make room for construction has been a default in years past, lately the department has been trying to find other ways to divert traffic.

"We've recognized that our construction activities have impacts, and we are committed to building these projects for the public in a way that provides the least amount of impact," he said.

Changes to the University Parkway and Center Street interchange designs came as UDOT worked with city officials after they expressed concern over the plans.

The University Parkway exit was revamped less than 10 years ago, but significant growth and an increase in pedestrians — many of them from Utah Valley University — has slowed traffic at a major intersection near the interchange. The proposed tunnel will run underneath University

Parkway from UVU to Sandhill Road, eliminating pedestrian traffic that currently takes up almost an entire stop in a traffic light cycle.

"Just that alone is going to make big improvements to the operation of that intersection," Braceras said.

The tunnel replaces a pedestrian bridge included in the original proposal. The change was made because people are less likely to use a bridge to cross the street, Braceras said. "It may seem small, but this is going to make a big difference to how this intersection operates," he said.

Plans to the interchange itself were also altered. The offramp will be widened from two lanes to three lanes. For now, however, the exit will remain construction-free; Njord said work on the University Parkway interchange will not begin immediately.

The new modifications for Provo's Center Street interchange were presented to the Provo City Council on Tuesday. Replacing the plans for a rotary facility with a modified diamond interchange will allow easier access to land that Provo hopes to develop and will make the interchange feel more natural to motorists, Njord said.

Though the lanes between the University Parkway and Center Street exits will remain open, Njord said there will still be slowdowns all along Utah County's stretch of I-15. As a result, UDOT is encouraging residents to avoid driving on the freeway during peak hours and to carpool and telecommute when possible. If 20 percent of traffic during peak hours can be diverted from the s curves, Njord said, "we're all going to be OK."

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UDOT Executive Director John Njord talks about design improvements on I-15 CORE.